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SIMPLICITY AND 'SOCIAL' LITERATURE

The saying, I remembered, was from Fénelon, but not first hand—I had not been reading Fénelon. I had come across it in a magazine, and had been so struck with it that I had lifted it into a commonplace-book. There it was to rest among my maxims—my truths. And now that I see it again, I find I still like it. And I remember that once I had imagined myself as writing a sermon, an eloquent and surpassing sermon, with this saying of Fénelon for my text—as one might announce: "My text to-day will be found in the fifth chapter of the first book of Fénelon, verse seventeen: 'Simplicity is an uprightness of soul which checks all useless dwelling upon one's self and one's actions. It is different from sincerity, which is a much lower virtue.'" And then in order to bring the people to absolute quiet, I had repeated the text: "Simplicity . . . [slowly and distinctly] . . . lower virtue."

At this point I imagined myself—not very cleverly, it seems to me now—as taking my congregation a bit into my confidence by advancing a double explanation, or, I might say, apology; that, in the first place, though I was to extol the virtue of simplicity, I was speaking to them as a sincere man. I was sorry, but such was the case. I would have given years of my life to be able to speak to them in simplicity. That was a virtue upon which I had cast my highest, though forlorn, admiration. But my horoscope was against me. In my most outrageous moments, I had never been able to be anything but sincere. The fault was due partly, no doubt, to heredity and partly to environment. I had been caught in both traps.

In the second place (my vein was still ingenuous), I had warned my hearers that I was likely to become intemperate and say some things I should be loath to stand by. For instance, I should be fairly certain, before the sermon were over, to denounce vehemently the virtue of sincerity, to have quite forgotten, in fact, that it was really a most excellent possession. Life, indeed, would be unbearable without it; they could all of them recall estimable and sincere people in their community. So, in

the sincerity of my excitement and in my yearning for simplicity, I should be likely to degrade the very virtue which in my own person I unavoidably represented.

Thus I should have launched my double warning. And having cleared the ground, I imagined myself as naïvely turning the page and proceeding. But it was too wonderful a sermon for me ever actually to have pulled through.

Fénelon, I doubt not, had come to his definition in the school of experience, and when he spoke of two qualities of the race, he was thinking, not of abstractions, but of people, kinds of people, such as he had dealt with often in the confessional. "So-and-so is conscience-ridden," he might have said, "she fetters her spontaneity with too much thought. I'll see if I cannot beguile her into betting on the next horse-race!" Or, as Fénelon pondered upon his definition, he might have been led to play with it, by recalling famous characters in history, putting, say, a simple man over against a sincere man, and being satisfied that the former was the finer; as we might put Homer against Dante, Shakespeare against Milton, Nelson against Wellington, St. Francis against Calvin, Cervantes against—I don't know whom. Perhaps, too, I might have hedged on the name of Dante, and Savonarola might take the place of Calvin as illustrating my point more subtly. The sphere of life, it is evident, does not matter. There are simple and sincere men of religion, just as there are simple and sincere statesmen, or poets, or scientists, or philosophers. These qualities are human attributes; they are not fastened upon definite professions. Darwin and Pasteur, for instance, are fair examples of simple scientists; Huxley, who lived, it is said, in a resolute fear of self-deception, of a sincere scientist.

But it seems as if this juxtaposition or balancing of traits might be illustrated otherwise than by calling upon figures of history. The theory or saying ought in some way to be brought nearer home and applied. Perhaps then we could see our own tendencies more clearly. These traits of sincerity and simplicity I should like to isolate, to examine each one naked, as it were, in order to probe the words of Fénelon. And I think I find them isolated and 'enfleshed' in two characters of a dramatist who

himself had the experience of passing from the state of simplicity to that of sincerity—I mean the characters of Solveig and Nora in Ibsen's plays, *Peer Gynt* and the *Doll's House*.

Solveig and Peer Gynt, we remember, first meet at a wedding feast; the encounter results in love; she becomes Peer Gynt's betrothed. He takes leave of her at a little hut in the high forest, he to go on his years-long travels, she to remain there spinning, spinning, and steadfast. She loses her youth awaiting his return; her hair turns gray. Still she sits sadly cheerful, uncomplaining, singing her little songs, and spinning.

Finally Peer, an old man, pursued, breathless, and in despair, drags himself to Solveig's hut, at the very moment that she, dressed for church, appears in the doorway. Peer flings himself down on the threshold, breaking forth into cries of self-condemnation. But no word of reproach passes her lips. "In nought hast thou sinned," she says; "Thou hast made all my life as a beautiful song." In reply to his riddle where Peer Gynt has been since they parted, she says, "In my faith, in my hope, and in my love." As Peer clings to her and hides his face in her lap, Solveig begins to hum softly a cradle song; the curtain falls while she is still singing, louder now, in the full daylight.

This character of Solveig is not a person so much as an embodied idea or ideal. In the flesh or to the eye she is of the peasant class, like Gretchen in *Faust*, a girl of very limited experience. A connoisseur would doubtless pronounce her heavy. She is without nerves and subtlety, devoid of outward resourcefulness. Life has for her few twists and turns, but is a straight path from which when once her feet strike it she never strays. Her being stretches to a fixed, clear goal. She has had a vision of the ideal in her youth and sets herself undeviatingly, unquestioningly, almost dispassionately, toward its realization. Her part in the play, in the number of lines, is not large, yet one somehow feels her presence there, just as one feels the presence of Cordelia in *Lear*, far in excess of the impression one would get by keeping tally on the number of times she appears.

Solveig, as I have said, is a symbol, an ideal; to me she is a sheer, unmixed embodiment of what Fénelon meant by sim-

plicity,—that uprightness of soul which dwells not upon self, and which is a higher virtue than sincerity.

“What is life?” asks Ibsen in one of his lyrics,—

“A fighting
In heart and in brain with Trolls.
Poetry? That means writing
Doomsday accounts of our souls.”

Is *Peer Gynt* a doomsday account of souls? Ibsen might have said it was. What we are certain of is, that soon after writing this play he dropped verse for prose. Ibsen's later interest lay not in the quiet spinners, but in nervous, active women, women in bustling difficulties, whose lives are torn by devious, conflicting motives. He seems deliberately to neglect poetry, those doomsday accounts, for the battles of mankind. He became, in a word, sincere, and naturally those characters through whom he fought his battles were sincere people, terribly in earnest and ill at ease.

We are pretty familiar with Nora now, or at least if not with her, with her lineal descendants on the modern boards. She enters, a twittering, frisking animal, for all the world as charmingly irresponsible as Dora in *David Copperfield*. It is Christmas Eve, and she has been buying presents for the three children. When they appear, she has a glorious romp with them, one of the most celebrated romps, indeed, in the history of the stage. It is still unfinished when the figure of Krogstad darkens the door. And now that brilliant play is begun. The plot hinges upon a forgery, the ensuing complications of which furnish Nora with much to reflect and act upon. She ultimately releases her husband from all his obligations toward her; she leaves the room and, as he sits there stupefied, from below is heard the reverberation of a heavy door closing.

Nora has been called to arms against a deadening environment of moral turpitude. Her struggle involves, in her awakening mind, the very existence of her personality. A further life with Helmer would have reduced her to a shell with a dead mollusk inside. So on her past she lets a heavy door reverberate.

And Ibsen, too, has closed a door on the Solveig type of woman. As a student of human responsibility under modern

social conditions, he has evidently concluded that people do not save themselves through renunciation, nor do they save others by weaving about them a web of their own ideals. Ibsen sets his characters down in a field of contemporaneous social barb-wires and calls on them, "Now cut your way out single handed." In other words, Nora will best arrive at her duty to others by recognizing fully at first what she owes to herself. The conceptions of society about her may have hardened, in so far as she can apply them to herself, into mere superstitions.

And now I think I have given a fair account of what Fénelon probably meant by the virtue of sincerity, that virtue which if left alone leads its possessor constantly to dwell upon himself and his actions. It involves a problem and a doubt. We accept Solveig; we discuss Nora. She is never absolutely certain that she is doing the right thing. Her creator, indeed, consented to give the play another ending. What of her children; what were her obligations there? The thing becomes insoluble. A singleness of purpose is wanting; she is tossed on a sea of misgivings,—this poor girl. She becomes egotistical. She was, when all is said, as experienced a person as was Cordelia or Solveig; but she was intent upon saving herself. *They* threw themselves to the winds and in their simplicity saved others. I seem to see prefigured in this character of Nora a contemporary malady,—not universal, of course, but fairly prevalent, especially in circles that like to think of themselves as intellectual and social leaders.

When a society is living in a condition of adjustment, of measurable content, let us say, both in matters temporal and spiritual, then the artists come forth and adorn that life and interpret it. Great art springs ever, I conjecture, from adjusted communities. I do not mean, of course, self-satisfied communities, but rather a society in which there has been a solution. In such a society there may be fervor and flux; the poets may dwell upon themes of high tragedy; yet in this poetry there are encountered always visions of definite ideals. "A great creative epoch in art can never occur where society is uncertain of itself and distracted in its aim."

But to live in an uncertain society is rarely thought of, I

imagine, as a misfortune. Most people accept it unawares; perhaps, indeed, they form an equilibrium in the unrest—they are Ibsen's confounded, compact majority. Some few grit their teeth and endure, wishing but accepting; but to many a distracted society is the great opportunity, for they themselves are uncertain and distracted, and are quite ready, many of them unconsciously, to impose their bewilderment upon the world. Fair types of such men in our modern perplexed society are, I should say, H. G. Wells and G. Bernard Shaw.

What Mr. Wells seriously claims for himself I do not know, though I dare say he is not a man of great pretence. He has thoughts on all subjects and is naïvely free to express them, some of them incisively; and people appear to be glad to hear him. Mr. Wells, as they say, grows; his book of to-morrow (and it is already on its way) is likely, quite likely, to be better than his book of yesterday; and it is also fairly certain that its point of view will be a little different, a little more conservative, I might guess, a little more like the point of view of the confounded, compact majority. For Mr. Wells grows right before us in public, undaunted; you can almost see his petals unfurl. Yet with all his versatility, there are two things that Mr. Wells will never be: he can never be a philosopher; he can never be a creative artist. He has not the patience for the one, nor the imagination for the other. Yet he will always swim about in both—in philosophy and in art; and he will popularize ideas, and put them in the form of art persuasively. His novels are studies in social problems—a perfectly legitimate thing for novels to be. Yet such studies do not easily lend themselves to creation; a real live, breathing character, Mr. Wells has never portrayed. I wish to speak of him for a moment in his latest sincerity.

"I don't want to become some one's certain possession," she cries, "to be just usual and familiar to any one. No, not even to you. . . . Don't you see?—I want to be wonderful to you, more than to any one. I want—I want always to make your heart beat faster. I want always to be coming to you with my own heart beating faster. Always and always I want to be like that."

Now these, I judge, are not unique words for a woman to address to a man. I fancy Nausicaä might have spoken like words to her Phæacian lover way back in the olden time. And Rachel might have talked thus to Jacob at the well. But the sequel is a trifle more modern, for the lady loves him so desperately that she cannot marry him. Her words do not come from a simple heart; they are profoundly, contemporaneously sincere. And so these people become victims of a false civilization—beings with "a sense of fine things entangled and stifled and unable to free themselves from the ancient limiting jealousies which law and custom embody."

Renunciation is not in their vocabulary, the meaning of confession they are unable to grasp; they have scarcely a synonym for vice, surely not for sin. The reviewer says: "Mr. Wells is but another victim, more intelligent than some others, of that passing belief that somehow happiness is to result for humanity from setting the emotions free of restraint rather than from the deliberate adjustment of the individual to the responsibilities imposed upon him."

"You keep on giving the public what it wants just as long as ever you can," says a character in a recent play. "That's your mission in life. Only prepare for the rainy day."

"What rainy day?"

"The day when the public wants something better than you can give it." (*Exit.*)

Precisely. Only (I feel like asking) what is there in your play, with its exhibits of odd characters, that suggests anything good of a future public? Are future publics just negations of present embarrassments? A man may rob or poison with the food he sells or batten on another's body and soul, yet he is scarcely more than a curiosity, a floundering, rather blameless creature—it's society alone that's wrong. How plausibly and adroitly and with what irresponsibility this view is set forth by the professional muck-rakers, that supposedly sincere group. 'Morals are social,' they ultimately seem to say. "Get at society with the right sort of machinery, and you've purified morals. The soul of the individual is of no consequence—it is simply the sort of stuff that melts in the pot." This doctrine,

spoken with gracious warmth, is sincerity turned infidel. There is, I conceive, a vast sentimentality about that happy future time and this distressing present time. In a former day this sentimentality turned to sorrowful "ah's" and "me's"; now it is rapped out with a cynical or urbane epigram. Tolstoy felt this disintegrating spirit so deeply that latterly he refused to write a story other than on themes of personal sacrifice, relinquishment or expiation. It's the sort of thing that Carlyle would have thundered about with a fine, old-fashioned sincerity.

And this is the door that Nora opened, is it not? As Othello puts it, "It is hypocrisy against the devil! They may mean virtuously, and yet do harm." Sincerity has turned about on itself and inflicted poisonous wounds. My hypothetical Nora is subject to a morbid dwelling upon herself and her actions. How unhappy she is, how abashed, and blameless! Is there no escape? Oh yes; there is a way out. Flee as a bird to thy mountain. And when Nora—this hypothetical Nora always—arrives at her place of refuge, she probably reflects a bit and gives voice to her torment—"I was certainly in a box," she seems to say; "it was stifling there, and one thing I at length saw clearly—I had to preserve my individuality. Against that dead life I was supremely impotent. The machinery behind it was too cruel." And so step by step we arrive at "the Wellsian dreaming about a new fraternity, a new social order, a new world race," where the emotions are never to be controlled but will always be free. And the way to preserve your personality is to wait for this grand day, and in the present be irresponsible, if not in act, at least in thought. I do not think I have overstated a type of philosophy that is floating about, especially among the garrulous—a philosophy which lends itself to rhetorical expression, and indeed finds that expression abundantly. "The whole of our social flourishing life is rooted in a lie," Dr. Stockmann exclaims, and many well-meaning people echo this cry so persistently that whatever there was of value in so palpable an exaggeration, has lost all its edge. The new half-truth has become stale and false, and unfit for further employment.

Perhaps I have driven this phase of Mr. Wells's philosophy too hard; and whether I have or not I greatly doubt if his

influence is as insidious as that of Mr. Shaw. Or am I wrong in assuming that the latter is really taken seriously? Well, I've heard him compared with Shakespeare. To be sure, there is some momentary doubt of the distinction of that Elizabethan. But Mr. Shaw really *is* taken seriously; read his prefaces.

My quarrel with the Shavian philosophy has already been touched upon. I shall merely endeavor to suggest what may be expected from it. In the papers I read of a meeting in London of students of Dickens. There is an entertainment toward, which takes the form of court proceedings—John Jasper being placed on trial for the murder of Edwin Drood. Bernard Shaw is foreman of the jury. After listening to the prosecuting counsel's speech, he bounds from his seat with the characteristic query to the judge: "Do you imagine, my lord, that the convictions of a British jury are going to be influenced by any amount of evidence?"

Wit is forever unanswerable, and wit is the charm of Mr. Shaw. But when wit and epigram and paradox are taken as the arbiters of serious questions, society is in danger of becoming the sport of negation. Mr. Shaw affirms very little; he denies. And he denies with the metallic din of one of plenty of brains possibly, but no heart. His emotional nature is not deep, and partly on that account his thoughts are rather static. He sprang from the head of Jove full panoplied. And his characters are static. They go off as they came on, fully developed. The plot simply tells us who they happened to be before we knew them. They are intellectual characters like their creator, and this is a reason for their lack of growth. And yet I do think some of them are real, for I believe that Mr. Shaw has a dramatic instinct and imagination. And of course at times there is so much wit that you wish a character were real, even if it is not so.

Those plays of Mr. Shaw do not spring from any great depth of experience, nor from a fixed love for his fellow-men. He has never heard the voice of the past. Admirations he may have in plenty, I dare say, but he has no reverence. And a man without a heart and without reverence may be as sincere as doomsday, but he is an unsafe guide. A Lesbia may say something

startling and shocking. But does any remark come from Lesbia as a truth, as a thing experienced? She has no experiences, no suffering, no past, no reverences. She has no back yard; it's all front door: nothing she can say has any moral value. And when Shaw, in his keen and critical and witty way, makes his drives at conventions, it is little more than clanging tin. Not that what he says isn't true; perhaps some of it is; but no man with his make-up can be trusted to analyze any issue of importance.

This specious wisdom Mr. John Jay Chapman characterizes from another point of view: "The loss which Shaw and Chesterton share in common," he says, "is a loss of delicacy. They are crude; they are all edge. They are, indeed, a little vulgar. But this is not the serious objection to them. The serious objection to Shaw and Chesterton is that they have no intellectual independence. They are moving with the show. It will pass and they with it."

What the show is, a scanning of the favored newspapers, of the popular magazines, of the best-sellers, of the bill-boards will easily determine. I give a few extracts, although I do not claim them all as specimens of sincerity; the imp of notoriety hovers in the background: "Mrs. So-and-So, whom we read about of late, has told the good people of Princeton that the militant movement is not emotional, not at all; it is tactical." Even Shaw and Chesterton would wince at this fragment of paradox.

Two prominent suffragists are advocating the exhibition of "white slave" moving-picture films. They maintain that the drawing of miscellaneous crowds to such an exhibition as the simple-minded police have been desirous to get rid of, will entail "a mighty service of which future generations will reap the benefit." As 'hopeless' suggestions as this have been made in the name of sincerity.

A play called *The Lure* comes to town. A girl has a sick mother; she apparently sells herself that the mother may be cured, poverty being a modern excuse for any crime. Here is a desperately tragic theme. The play ends in pure melodrama, one act having been fortunately expunged by the censors. A play written for money, with no other purpose; and yet in all

sincerity fathers were invited to take their daughters to that exhibition. The popular play, *Within the Law*, turns another perfectly serious theme into melodrama. The play was written palpably for the market; it has been discussed seriously. Opera bouffé treads in lockstep with tragedy.

The marital relation forms, of course, matter for profound utterance. "In common with many other Feminists," a recent writer affirms, "I incline to place a good deal of reliance on the ennobling of the nature of the male." *Male*—so personal! It is thought by this same seriously inclined authority that "the association of human beings in couples appears to respond to some deep need." Mystic discovery! "The modern wife," says an editor of a thirty-five-cent magazine, "wants a husband who has read Brioux and Arthur Schnitzler." This will be painful news to bachelors who are fond of *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Beloved Vagabond*, Joseph Vance or *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The husband of this modern wife should be a man, evidently, who takes to ideas, and ideas are on their native heath in your modern problem play. Such simple, open, things as *Lear* or *Othello*, wherein there is never any confusion as to who the villain is and what it is that makes people good and bad, are rather barren of ideas. A man whose favorite book happens to be *Don Quixote*, that great purveyor of dreams, would make a rather feeble modern husband.

The leaders of this merry show assume with Stockmann that a normally constituted truth has a very short life. And so they are straining away, some of them earnestly, some flippantly, to put a pin through each new truth before it flutters down the wind. And my criticism has been that this view is distracted and uncertain. A philosophy which rejects human nature as we know it, and spurns its limiting conditions of self-sacrifice and renunciation has not brooded to much purpose; and a state of mind that carps and exposes all conventions to unreflective censure is thoroughly vicious. A question might be asked here possibly: Are such leaders affecting our social life profoundly, or are they merely scratching its surface; is the majority still compact, willing to abide by its experiences? To that question I have no answer.

But I have often wondered how that sermon of mine really came out—how, after heaping contumely upon the virtue of sincerity, I eventually fetched a compass and glided into serene, determinate waters. It is none too clear to me. “How almost helpless,” says some one, “is sympathy without knowledge. Love is indeed ‘the greatest thing in the world,’ but without knowledge, acquired knowledge—real culture—love is like a skilled workman without his tools, a mariner without his chart and compass.” Might not, perhaps, simplicity and sincerity be conceived of as standing in somewhat the same relation as, in this quotation, stand love and knowledge. Simplicity is indeed the higher virtue, but the simplicity of one age passes; knowledge and sincerity are constantly pressing from below. The Solveig type becomes too intangible, too pastoral, too remote. For life is constantly more packed, more complex, exacting, devious, and rich. The Nausicaäs change inevitably into the Vittoria Colonnas. And of a complex and devious society, the best social dramas and the best social novels are necessary escape valves. Who does not find them stimulating and provocative? They have made with us a permanent home.

But this ‘social’ literature always moves on the lower levels. It can never attain the highest art. From it the scaffolding has not yet been knocked away. One notes the processes, the inquiry, with always the accompanying self-consciousness and hesitancy. The picture of Emerson willing to go to the stake but questioning the nature of his own emotions, or that of Tolstoy persuading himself that a parable is the highest form of art, reveals the scaffolding of sincerity. Simple art, on the other hand, is always naïve, ‘unconscious,’ free. It has plenty to do with ideas, yet its truths have already been worked out in real life; they are not in process of discovery. Its message and its breathings are personal. Its characters burst living upon one; they are not samples to investigate. And yet simple art carries with it from age to age a greater complexity and richness. It has been pushed up upon the shoulders of unrest and questioning. The simple art of the future will doubtless show the influence of the sincerity of ‘social’ literature. This might indeed take place without doing violence to the words of Fénelon.

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